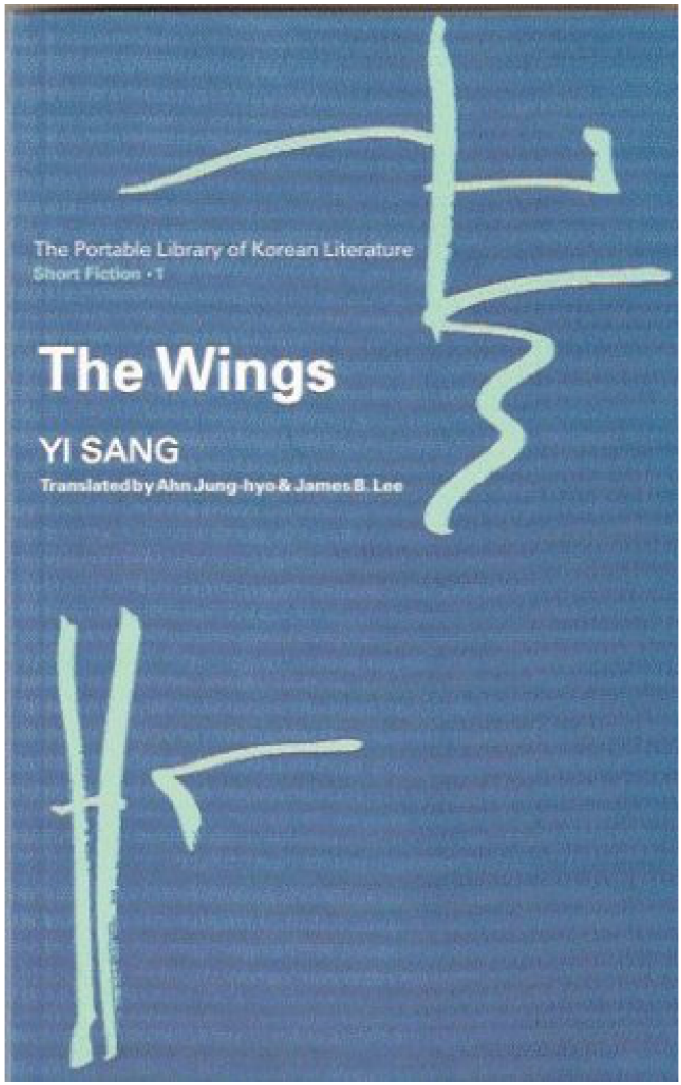
The Portable Library of Korean Literature
Short Fiction • 1
The Wings
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The Portable Library of Korean Literature

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— Korea Literature Translation Institute

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The Wings

Have you ever seen a stuffed genius? I am happy. At a time like this, even love is pleasant.

Only when the body sways from fatigue does the soul sparkle like a new, shiny coin. As nicotine seeps into my stomach infested by round-worms, a sheet of white paper opens in my head. I put down witty and paradoxical thoughts like checker pieces on that white sheet of paper. It is an abominable disease of common sense.

I again plan a life with a woman. I am a spiritual straggler who has been, so to speak, after a momentary peep at crystalized intellectualism, alienated from the strategies of love. I am planning a life granting only half to the woman—half of everything, that is. One foot planted in that sort of life, a half of myself chuckles at the other half, like two suns. I might even give up the life, bored to the bones by its ordinary events. Good-bye.

Good-bye. You may indulge in the absurdity of hogging for the food you hate most. Wits and paradox....

It is worth trying to counterfeit yourself.

Your creation would be sublime and conspicuous among the ordinary products you have never seen.

Close down the 19th Century, if at all possible. The spirit of Dostoevsky can be easily wasted. Wise was he who compared Hugo to a loaf of bread for France. You must not be deceived by life or its phantom because of its details, right? Be out of harm's way. I pray you....

(When the bandage is cut, it bleeds. The gash will heal soon, I believe. Good-bye.)

Sentiment is a certain posture. (I may only refer to the ingredients of that posture.) If that posture develops into a stagnation, sentiment ceases to dispose of itself.

In retrospect of my extraordinary maturity, I regularized my view point of the world.

A queen bee and a widow—among the countless women is there anyone who is not basically a widow? Pardon. Is it an insult, my theory that the whole of every woman in real life is a widow? Good-bye.

The structure of House No. 33 is just like that of a house of pleasure.
At this house eighteen households live side by side, their papered lattice doors identical and the cooking holes identical, too. And the residents are as young as blossoms. There is no sun, for they look away from the sun. They block the sun's way into the rooms under the pretext of airing their stained bedding quilts on the washline under the eaves.

They take naps in the dusky rooms. Don't

they sleep at night? I do not know. I never know because I sleep both day and night. In the daytime, House No. 33 of eighteen families is very quiet.
It is quiet only in the daytime. At dusk, they take their bedding quilts in. With the lights on, the eighteen rooms are brighter than they had been in the daytime. The sound of opening and closing the sliding doors continues to the late hours. They become busy. All sorts of smells start wafting around... the smell of roasting fish, the smell of waste water, the smell of soap....

The name plates are the most fascinating of all. There is a gate representing the eighteen households, though set apart at a corner. It is always open, like a pathway. Any peddler could freely pass through this gate at any time of the day. The dwellers buy bean curd cakes at the door of their rooms, not out at the gate. To have all the name plates of the eighteen households put together at the gate of House No. 33 makes no sense at all. Somehow, it has become custom that they put their name plates above each room door beneath the tablets showing the pompous names such as "Eternal Perseverance Pavilion" and "Auspicious Pavilion."

We surely were fashionable enough to stick to the custom; at a corner above the door, we tacked my wife's name card as large as a train ticket.

I play with nobody, nor do I ever say hello to anybody. I do not want to exchange formalities with anybody but my wife. For me to play with or to say hello to anybody won't do any good in saving my wife's face. I

regard my wife as that precious.

I cherish my wife so dearly, because among all the women of the eighteen families at House No. 33, my wife is the most beautiful and, like her name card, the most petite woman. In the shaded world under the tin roof, she radiates as the most beautiful among all the blossoms of the eighteen households. I cause an ignominious, cumbersome existence for her, looking after... just hanging around the flower.

My room—it is not a house, because we never had one—suited me, by all means. The temperature of the room pleased me, and the duskiness of the room comforted my eyes. I did not want any other room cooler or warmer than my own, nor a room darker or more comfortable. I thanked my room all the time because it seemed to maintain itself to please me, and I was glad that I might have been born to the world for that particular room. But I did not consider happiness or unhappiness. I never needed to wonder whether I was happy or unhappy.

Everything was all right as long as I was allowed to loaf day after day.

That I could idle in the room fitting like a well-tailored suit to my body and soul was a convenient and comfortable situation to be in, an ideal atmosphere far apart from the worldly speculations of happiness or unhappiness. I like that environment.

My room, this absolute shelter, is the seventh from the gate—lucky number seven. I loved that number like a medal of honor. But no one noticed that the sliding door dividing the

room in half symbolized my destiny.

The front part of the room has a little bit of the sun. The sunshine, as large as a wrapping cloth in the morning, shrinks to the size of a handkerchief later and then slips out of the room. My den is the other part of the room without sunshine, of course. I do not remember who decided that the room with the sunshine was for my wife and the other without sunshine belonged to me. I have no complaints, though.

It has become a major recreation of mine that I promptly go to the front room in the morning when my wife goes out and watch various bottles on her make-up chest brilliantly glimmer with the sunbeam trickling in through the eastern window I opened.

I have fun scorching tissue paper, which only my wife is entitled to use, with a small magnifying glass. The straight rays of the sun are refracted to gather at a focus, and that focus gets warmer and hotter until it starts scorching the soft paper, a feeble thread of smoke wriggling up, leaving a tiny dark hole; I am so thrilled by this short spell of anxious waiting that it almost kills me.

When I am tired of this, I play in many ways with my wife's handled looking glass. A mirror is a practical thing only when it reflects one's own face. At other times, it is only a plaything.

Soon I am tired of this fun, too. My mischievous mind evolves from the physical level to the spiritual one. I put the looking glass down and crawl on my knees to the

make-up chest to watch the cosmetic bottles in various colors. They are the most charming things in the world. I pick one of them, open its stopper, draw the bottle to my nostrils and slowly inhale. As an exotic, sensual scent seeps into my lungs, my eyelids heavily hang down, despite myself. Definitely the scent is a segment of the smell of my wife's body. I replace the stopper and begin to think. Which part of her body did I smell this from...? I am not sure. Why am I not sure? Because my wife's smell is the collection of all the smells from the bottles here.

My wife's room was always luxuriant. While my room was so untrimmed that not even a single hook to hang the clothes on could be found on the walls, in her room, colorful skirts and vests hung in billowing bundles down from the numerous pegs nailed into the walls just beneath the ceiling. Various, colorful patterns fascinate me. I think I am not so respectable because I used to try to visualize her body and the possible shape her body might take inside those clothes.

However, I had few clothes. My wife seldom gave me new ones. The only corduroy outfit I wore served as pajamas, common wear, and outing attire as well. The turtleneck was my underwear in all seasons. They were all dyed black. I suspect that the dark color had been chosen for me so that my clothes would not look too bad if not laundered for a long time. In my shorts that had rubber bands at the waist and the thighs, I played meekly like a good boy.

The sunshine that had been as large as a

handkerchief had already slipped out, but my wife was not home yet. Somewhat exhausted by the trifles I had been engaging in, and knowing that I had to be back to my room before her return, I retired to my room. My room was dusky. I pulled the bedding quilt over my head to take a nap. The quilt, which had never been removed from its set location, seemed to be a welcome part of my body. Sometimes I fell asleep promptly. Sometimes I simply felt sandy all over my skin. Then I would conjure up a theme and meditate about it. Under the limp quilt, my imagination invented many things and wrote many treatises. I composed a lot of poems.

But at the moment of falling asleep, every product of my imagination would dissolve into the damp air in the room like soap bubbles melting in the water, and, waking up, I would find myself a mere congestion of a nervous system, a lump like a pillow stuffed with buckwheat husks or cotton shreds.

I hated bed bugs very much. But several bugs managed to survive in my room all the time, even in winter. If I had any worries, they derived from my hatred for those bugs. I scratched the itching parts bitten by the bugs until my skin bled. It was sore. It certainly was an act of profound pleasure. I fell asleep luxuriously.

In my contemplating sessions under that damp quilt, I never engaged in positive thinking. For me, that was not necessary at all. If I discovered something positive, eventually I had to discuss it with my wife and she would scold me and… that was

bothersome, although I am not afraid of her scolding. I would rather be lazy like a loafing beast than to be a respectable, individual, social being and be scolded by her. If it were possible, I would cast off this meaningless mask of humanity.

For me human society was autonomous. Life was self-providing. Everything was strange to me.

My wife washes her face twice a day.
I wash myself not even once a day.
I usually go to relieve myself at three or four o'clock in the morning to look at myself in a mirror. I also linger outside absent-mindedly for some time before returning to my room. So I rarely come across anyone of the eighteen households. Still, I recognize most of the women in the eighteen families. None of them is a peer to my wife in beauty.

My wife's first session of face washing at eleven in the morning is rather simple. Her second session around seven in the evening takes much time and care. She dresses herself better and cleaner at night. She goes out at daytime and she goes out at night, too.

Did she have a job? I could not tell what her occupation was. If she did not have a job, she did not have to go out, as I did not have to—but she did. She not only went out but entertained many guests at home. When she had many guests, I had to stay under the bedding quilt in my room all the time she was with them.

I could not play with the magnifying glass. I could not sniff at the cosmetics. On those occasions, I pretended to be sorrowful. Then

she would tip me a coin, a 50 jeon silver coin. I liked it. Since I did not know what to do with those coins, I used to throw them to the head of my bed until the silver coins formed a small pile. My wife saw the collection of coins one day and bought me a coffer-shaped savings box. After I put all my coins in the box one by one, she locked the box and took the key away. I remember I kept dropping a coin now and then into the box even after that. And I kept being lazy. When I found a trinket dangling like a pimple on her forehead, I understood why the saving box was lighter than before. I stopped paying attention to the box. I was too lazy to alert myself against such incidents.

When my wife was attending guests at night, however deeply I might burrow into the bed, I could not fall asleep on rainy nights. At such times, I meditated on as to why my wife always had money, much money.

The visitors seemed not to be aware of my presence at this side of the partition of the sliding door. They would frequently utter such reckless jokes to my wife that I myself would not dare to share with her.

However, some of her guests were well-mannered; they usually left a little later than midnight. Some others were rather uncultured, and those personalities would order foods from nearby restaurants and would enjoy themselves all night.

At first, I started research to identify my wife's occupation, but I failed to verify her vocation due to my limited knowledge of and

short-sighted observations on life. I may never be able to discover what her profession is.

My wife wore brand-new white cotton socks all the time. She cooked rice, too. As a matter of fact, I have never seen her cook, but she never failed to fetch me something to eat at meal time. At our home, there is nobody but my wife and I. So, she must have cooked the rice.

Yet my wife never invited me to her room. I always ate and slept alone in the hidden room. The rice was tasteless. The side dishes were miserable. Although I kept taking the fodder like a puppy or a chicken without complaints, I regretted the dreadful food now and then. Naturally I was emaciated, my complexion growing paler and paler. I noticed my health failing me everyday. The bones stood out here, and there as tokens of undernourishment. I could not stand the pain at the joints of my bones in bed, so I tossed to this side and that tens of times a night.

During my research about the origin of her money, I investigated what kind of food was being served at the other side of the sliding door from the smell drifting in through the door's chinks. I had a troubled sleep.

I found out. I realized that the money she spent was given by the strange visitors, whom I considered very silly. However, I could not understand the ethics of the guests leaving the money and my wife taking it.

Could it be out of sheer courtesy? Or was it a sort of price, a reward for something? Did my wife look to them to be a pitiful woman

in need of alms?

As I tried to untangle such riddles, my intellect would whirl in chaos. The final conclusion I reached before falling asleep was that I did not like the whole business, but I did not ask her any questions about it. That questioning might have been troublesome, and, anyway, I would forget it all by the time I woke up.

After the guests left, or when she returned home from her outing, she would change to common clothes and then drop in at my room. Lifting the quilt, she would whisper several untrue words into my ears to console me. With a smile that is neither a sneer nor a cheer, I looked up at her radiant face. She smiled. But I did not miss a ghost of sadness hovering about her countenance.

She would certainly notice that I was hungry. Yet she never offered me the leftover foods in the other room. That was out of her respect towards me, I thought. Although I was hungry, it satisfied me. I did not care what she whispered into my ears before returning to her room. The silver coin she left at the head of my bed glittered in the electric light.

How many of those coins could have gathered in the savings box? I did not lift the box to measure the weight, though. I merely dropped new coins into the narrow slot that looked like a button hole.

The reason why my wife had to leave me silver coins was as much a mystery to me as the reason why the visitors offered her money. Though I did not disapprove her of

tipping me the coins, it offered me no more pleasure than the short happiness lasting from the moment my fingers touched the coin until it disappeared into the miniature coffer's slot.

One day I threw the savings box into the toilet. I did not know exactly how many coins were in it, but the box was quite heavy.

I felt despondent when I recognized my existence on an earth that was dashing with lightening speed across the limitless space. I wanted to get off the earth promptly lest I should feel giddy on that busy globe.

After I meditated in my bed about such things, even such acts as dropping the coins into the box seemed to be annoying, too. I hoped my wife would manage the saving business herself. I hopefully waited for her to take that box to her room, if she had a mind to at all, because my wife alone needed money, which never meant anything to me in the first place. But she did not take it with her. I almost decided to take it to her room myself, but there were so many guests for her those days that I found no opportunity to deliver it to her room. So, I had to take it to the toilet.

I sadly waited for her reproach. But she did not ask or say anything to me about it. That was not all; she kept giving me the coins. Soon, there was a new small heap of coins by my pillow.

Lying in bed, I started new research leading to the conclusion that there was no reason but simple pleasure that might have prompted my wife to tip me and the visitors

to offer her money. I continued my research to determine what kind of pleasure it was, if pleasure had been the motivation for such charities. However, I could not discover it all from my research in bed alone. Pleasure... pleasure.... I found myself unexpectedly engrossed in that joy.

My wife in a way confined me all the time. I, of course, had no complaints. Yet I wanted to learn from experience if that pleasure existed or not.

I sneaked out of my room while my wife was out. Outside on the street, I did not forget to change my coins for bills. They amounted to five won. With that money in my pocket, I loitered around as I pleased so that I might get lost.

The wonderful outside world, which I had not seen for a long time, did not fail to arouse my nerves. I was tired out immediately, but I endured. Until dark, I sauntered aimlessly here and there not knowing why I was doing this. I did not spend a penny, of course. I did not dare to spend any. It seemed I had a long time ago completely lost the faculty of spending money.

I could not stand fatigue any longer. I somehow got back to my house. Since I had to pass through my wife's room to reach mine, I hesitatedly hemmed before the sliding door to notify her of my presence, in case she was with any visitors. Suddenly the door whacked open, and her face, along with a stranger's face behind it, peeked out at me. I faltered a little, dazed by the blinding light

flooding out of the room.

I saw her spiteful stare, but I simply had to pretend that I had seen nothing. Why? Because I had to pass through her room and….

I pulled the quilt over my head. My legs ached unbearably. In bed, I was going to faint any moment, and my heart pounded heavily. I had been unaware of it while walking, but I was out of breath. Cold sweat stood out on my back. I regretted that I had gone out. I wanted a long, sound sleep, forgetting all this fatigue. I wanted a good, long sleep.

As I lay on my side for some time, my thumping heart eased down. I felt much better. I tossed myself to lie down flat, to look up at the ceiling—and stretched my legs.

My heart was destined to keep on thudding for some time. Through the slit in the sliding door, I overheard the hushed whisper shared by my wife and her man guest at the other side of the partition. I opened my eyes wide to further concentrate my auditory senses. I held my breath. Then I heard them rise. The man put on his coat and hat. The sliding door opened, and his heels slipped into his shoes. He thudded down to the yard, and her rubber shoes dragged down the stepping stones. The sound of their unhurried feet went afar towards the gate.

I had never known of such behavior on the part of my wife. To the best of my knowledge, she had not whispered to any of her guests in such a manner before. I never

missed any words spoken by my wife in that particular voice, which was neither too loud nor too quiet, although I sometimes ignored the warbles of the drunk, tongue-twisted guests. Some of the unsavory remarks made by her visitors got on my nerves, but I used to forgive them because they were relatively behaving themselves. I disapproved of that sudden change in her attitude towards her guests—probably because of some certain unavoidable reasons, I wondered, but I resolved not to engage myself any more in such kind of research because I was tired that night. So I tried to sleep. I could not fall asleep at first. Nor did she return from the gate quickly. Somehow, in the mean time, I fell asleep despite myself. My dream drifted along strange labyrinthine streets.

I was shaken violently. My wife was shaking me after she had seen her guest off. I opened my eyes wide to look up at her. No smile could I see in her face. I scrubbed my eyes and studied her expression more closely. Anger was in her eyes, her thin lips trembling. It was an anger that would not thaw away easily. I closed my eyes, waiting for her to explode. But she gasped a while, and then I heard her long skirt swish away as she went back to her room. I tossed myself to squat like a frog wrapping my back with the bedding quilt, and again, I regretted that I had gone out.

From bed, I apologized to my wife. That it was of her own misunderstanding....

I believed that it was late enough for my homecoming. Really I did not know that it was earlier than midnight. I was too tired. I

was foolish that I had walked too much. If it really was my fault, that was it. What had I gone out for, anyway?

I wanted to give the money, five won, that had collected by my pillow, to somebody, to anybody at all. That was all. If it was still my fault, perhaps it was so. Was I not sorry about that?

If I had known how to spend that five won, I certainly did not need to return home before midnight. But the streets were crowded, too crowded, and there were too many of them. I could not point out a single person out of the crowd, the one to whom I was supposed to give that money away. Eventually, I tired myself out.

Above all, I needed a rest. I wanted to lie down. I could not but come back home. I believed it was late enough, but it was unfortunate that it was before midnight. I was sorry. I could apologize as much as she wanted. But what was all this apology for, anyway, as long as she did not understand how it had happened? It was annoying.

For an hour, I fidgeted like that. I pushed the quilt away, squirmed up, opened the sliding door and shuffled into her room. My head was swimming in half-consciousness. I only faintly remember that, falling over her bedding quilt, I fished out the money from my pocket and crushed it into her hand.

When I woke up the next morning, I was in her bed, in her room. This was the first time that I had ever slept in her room since we moved to House No. 33.

The sun was up high but she was not with me; she had gone out early in the morning. Well, she might have gone out last night immediately after I had fallen unconscious. But I did not feel like investigating it. My whole body was so sore that I found difficulty even in wiggling my fingers. The sun in the window, a little bit smaller than a wrapping cloth, dazzled my sight. In the column of the sun's numerous particles of dust danced like microbes. My nostrils were stuffy. I pulled the quilt over my head and began working on a nap. But the scent of my wife's body coming from the bedding cloth stirred my nostrils, irritating me. I could not fall asleep easily as I, tossing myself time and again, floated amid clouds of various scents popping out in my memory, the perfumes smoking out of the colorful bottles on the make-up chest.

As I could not stand it any longer, I kicked off the quilt and came back to my room. An assembly of bowls containing my cold breakfast was waiting there. Before going out, my wife had prepared that fodder for me. I was hungry at the moment. The first spoonful of rice felt against my tongue as cold as an iced fish slice. I put down the spoon and wormed into the bedding quilt. The bedding, that had not been occupied the previous night, welcomed me, as usual. With the quilt over me, I slept heartily. Very soundly….

The electric light was on when I woke up, but my wife was not in yet. Maybe she had returned and gone out again. Why should I worry?

I felt better. I recalled what had happened the previous night. I simply could not describe the joy I had felt when I, collapsing, thrust the money into her hand. I was enthralled that I understood, to some extent, the psychology of the visitors leaving money to my wife or my wife tipping me the coins. I simpered. I, who had lived in ignorance of that delight, had been so naive, it seemed. I felt like dancing around.

So I wanted to go out again that night. But I had no money. I resented that I had given her all of the five won last night. And I regretted that I dumped the savings box into the latrine. I was quite disappointed and listlessly thrust my hands into my pants pocket, where the money had been hidden once, and fished around. To my great surprise, I felt something. It was money, though only two won. It did not need to be much money. What was there was sufficient for me, and I was very grateful for what I got.

I found my strength. I strutted out to the street triumphantly, attired in my only corduroy suit, unaware of hunger and my unmentionable appearance. Going out, I restlessly prayed for time to flee like a shot arrow so that it would be past midnight in no time. Though I liked that I had given her money and slept in her room, I was afraid to confront her accusing stare in the unfortunate case that I should return home before midnight while she was with her companion. I roamed around until dark, glancing again and again at the street clocks. Strangely, I was not so easily tired out that

evening. The only thing that bothered me was the slowness of time.

After I made sure by the big clock at the Gyeongseong Station that it was after midnight, I headed for home. I found my wife talking to her guest at the gate. I passed by them, ignoring their presence, and went into my room. A while later, she came in. She began to sweep the room, in the middle of the night, something she had not done in her whole life. Afterwards, as soon as I heard her lie down to sleep, I opened the sliding door, plunged into her room, and gave her two won—she cast a questioning glance at me, as if she wondered why I had not spent the money that night, either—and she let me sleep in her room without any questions. I did not want to give this joy away for anything in the world. I slept soundly.

The next morning when I woke up, she was not home. Lethargic, I crept back to my room and took a nap.

When she shook me to wake me up the light was on, as usual. She invited me to her room. This, too, was unprecedented. She pulled my arm, all the while a smile rippling in her face. I was quite restless, suspecting that there might be a secret plot hidden behind such a strange attitude.

At her request, I dragged myself to her room. Supper was prepared there. I remembered that I had not eaten anything for two days. I vaguely wondered if I was hungry at all.

I reasoned that even if a thunder of wrath followed this last supper, I would not be resentful. In fact, I had been too annoyed by

the boring human world. Everything bothered and troubled me, but an unexpected catastrophe would have excited me. Peacefully I shared that quiet odd supper with my wife. We didn't talk to each other. So, after supper, I simply slouched up and shuffled back to my room. She did not hold me back. Sitting against the wall, with a cigarette in my mouth, I waited for the thunder to strike soon, if it would strike at all.

Five minutes... ten minutes....
But there was no thunder. Tension gradually eased down. I was already thinking about going out again that night, wishing I had some money.

I had no money with me. There would be no joy I could expect afterwards even if I would go out. I was crestfallen. Angrily, I rolled in the bed. The rice I had just eaten seemed to push up back to my throat. I felt nausea.

I was sad and angry that bank bills did not pour down from the sky like a shower. I did not know any other way to get money. I think I cried a little in bed. Sad that I had no money....

Then my wife came to my room again. Holding my breath, I squatted like a toad and waited for the violent reproach that I anticipated to fall on me. On the contrary, the voice emitting out of my wife's lips was a tender one. She spoke with affection. She said she understood why I cried. She said it was because I had no money. I was surprised. I was worried by her ability for such a thorough understanding of my mind;

yet I was happy because I noticed from the way she spoke to me that she would give me some money. As I waited for her next move, wrapping myself with the quilt…. Here—she dropped something near my pillow, something that sounded like bill. Then she whispered into my ear that it would be perfectly all right if I returned home that night later than usual. That was by no means difficult. Above all, I was grateful for the money.

Anyway, I went out. I had an early case of nyctalopia, so I chose to wander along the streets illuminated brightly. I went to the Gyeongseong Station and stopped by a tea room near the waiting hall for the express passengers. That tea room was a great discovery of mine.

First of all, nobody I knew came there. Even if there was one, he would not stay too long there. I decided that I would come there every evening to pass the time.

What I liked about the place was that the clock there kept more accurate time than any other clocks anywhere. So I did not have to face any misfortune of returning home too early, mistaken by a stupid clock. I sat with nothingness in a booth and sipped a cup of hot coffee. Amid their busy hours, the passengers seemed to enjoy a cup of coffee with relish. They would gaze at a wall as if in deep thought, sipping the coffee in a hurry, and then would leave. It was sad. But I truly loved that sadness about that place, something I cherished more than the depressing atmosphere of other streetside tea rooms. The occasional shrill screaming of the

train hoots sounded more familiar and intimate to me than Mozart.

I read up and down the short list on the menu several times. The names of foods looked as remote to me as the names of my early childhood friends.

As I was drifting in swimming thoughts, lost in time, customers disappeared one after another, and the waiters began to clean the tables and the corners of the room, so it must be the time to close. A little past eleven the tea room ceased to be a shelter for me. I shambled out, worrying where I should go to pass the time, loitering, until and after midnight. It was raining. The rain drops were big enough to harass me, for I did not have an umbrella or a rain coat. In such quaint attire of mine I could no longer loaf in the hall of the station, so I left the place, ready to risk the rain.

It was so cool outside that I could not stand much of it. My corduroy suit was soaked, my underwear damp and cold against my skin. I tried to wander in the rain until the last moment I could endure, waiting for midnight to come and go, but I could not stand it too long. I got chilly with fever, my teeth chattering.

Hurrying my pace, I thought, Well, she certainly wouldn't have any guests on such a night of hard rain. I decided to believe she had no visitors. I had to go home. If she unfortunately had guests, I would beg for her understanding of my situation. She could see it was raining so hard, and she would forgive me for anything.

When I hurried back home, she was not alone. I was cold and damp. I happened to forget to knock. And I happened to see what my wife would have preferred me not to. Leaving huge, wet foot prints across my wife's room, I came into my den, took my wet clothes off and covered myself with the bedding quilt. I shivered all over. The fever was growing severe. I felt the earth was crumbling down underneath me. Finally I fell unconscious.

The next morning when I opened my eyes, my wife was sitting by me with a worried look. I had caught cold. I felt cold, my limbs lethargic, and I had a splitting headache.

She felt my head and said I had to take medicine. As I thought I would have to take an antifebrile because I had such a fierce fever as to feel her hands cold against my forehead, she gave me a cup of warm water and four tablets. She told me that I would be all right if I took the tablets and had a sound sleep. I gulped them down. A little arid, they tasted like aspirins. I pulled the quilt over me again and fell asleep as if dying instantly.

I ailed for several days, sniffling. I continually took the tablets while I was sick. I recovered from the cold. But my appetite did not return; everything tasted as bitter as sumac bark.

I regained the urge to go out, but my wife forbade me. She told me to take the medicine every day and stay in bed. She said I had gone out for no good reason at all but to fall sick and bother her. She was right. So I decided I would look after my health, taking

the medicine everyday and not going out again.

I slept day and night, covering myself with the quilt. Day and night, deadly sleep hung heavily over me, and I firmly believed it was an evidence of my recovery that I wanted that much sleep.

It seemed a month had passed that way. My hair and beard had grown so long that I felt scruffy, so I sneaked into my wife's room while my wife was out and sat before the make-up chest to see how I looked. It was quite a sight. My hair and beard bristled out in all directions. I made up my mind to have my hair cut today, and I took the bottles, removed the stoppers and sniffed the perfume one by one. The scent I had forgotten for so long stung my nostrils. I called my wife's name in my heart. "Yon-sim...."

I played with the magnifying glass, too. I played with the mirror. The sunrays trickling through the window were so warm. Well, it was May already.

I stretched myself and lied down in my wife's bed, and I wanted to brag to God that my life was so comfortable and pleasant. I maintained no relations with anything in the world. Not even God perhaps could praise or punish me.

Then I noticed a very strange thing. It was bottle of soporific adaline. I found it under her make-up chest, and I thought it looked like aspirin. I opened it. Exactly four tablets were missing.

I remembered I had taken four pills that morning. I slept. Yesterday, the day before yesterday, and the day before that, I had been heavily drowsy. I had recovered from the cold, but she kept giving me the drugs. Once, a neighbor's house was on fire while I was deeply asleep. I did not know it because I was asleep. I slept like that. I must have taken adalines, believing they were aspirins, for a month. That was too much.

All of a sudden, I felt giddy, and I almost fainted. I left home with the bottle of drugs in my pocket, and I climbed up a hill. I did not want to see anything of the human world. Plodding, I tried not to think anything about my wife. I did not want to faint on the road. I was going to do some research about my wife after I found and settled down at a sunny place. I thought about the multiplication and breeding of the roadside forsythia, the skylarks, and the stones. Fortunately, I did not faint on the road.

There was a bench. I sat on it stiffly and began my investigation on aspirins and adalines. But my mind was in such confusion that I could not lead an organized scientific reasoning. I turned gruff and annoyed because astray thoughts would not let my investigation continue for even five consecutive minutes. I took out the six adalines I had brought with me from my pocket and chewed them. They tasted funny. Then I lay down full length on the bench. Why had I done it? I could not give the reason. I simply wanted to. I fell deeply asleep there. In my sleep, I faintly heard the distant chatter of a stream running among

rocks.

When I woke up, the day was already bright. I had slept there one full day and night. The landscape looked pure yellow. A flock of thoughts about aspirin and adaline flew through my head.

Aspirin, adaline, aspirin, Marx, Malthus, matross, aspirin, adaline.

My wife had given me adalines for a month, telling me they were aspirins. The evidence was only obvious because I found the bottle in her room.

For what purpose did she have to make me sleep day and night?

What did she do all the while I was asleep after she had given me the drug?

Did she want me to die gradually?

What I had taken might have been really aspirins, after all. Maybe, she was the one who had to take adalines herself to help her fall asleep and overcome a certain agony she had. If so, I was sorry. I was sorry that I had suspected her so much.

I hurried my way down the hill. I walked towards home, my legs reeling beyond control. It was almost eight o'clock.

I was going to confess and apologize to her for all my evil thoughts. I was in such a hurry that I forgot to prepare what I was going to say.

Then a really terrible thing happened. I happened to see what I should not. In a flurry, I shut the sliding door of my wife's

room and I clung to the door post, hanging my head to get over the dizziness. The next instant, the door opened, and she rushed into my room, her clothes ruffled, rushed out of the room to clutch my neck. I tumbled down, my head in turmoil. Then she landed on top of me and bit me at random. It hurt. Since I had no strength or intention to resist, I sprawled down meekly and let her do whatever she wanted to do about me. Soon, her guest came out of the room, lifted her and went back to the room, carrying her in his arms. I hated her being so submissively carried away into the room by a stranger. I hated her.

On her way back to her own room, my wife raved viciously that I had been loafing around night after night making love to women or stealing things. That really was too much. I could not protest about anything, dumbfounded.

I almost started to scream at her that she had been planning to kill me, but I restrained myself, for I did not want to face any consequences by saying anything I was not so sure of.

Believing silence was the best policy at the moment, I shambled up to my feet, quietly pulled out the money from my pocket, and not knowing exactly why I did so, I put it before the sliding door and ran away.

Several times I was almost run over by a car before I managed to reach the Gyeongseong Station. I wanted to sit in an empty booth and somehow get rid of the sour taste in my mouth. Coffee. Fine. But at the moment I

stepped into the station building, I suddenly recalled that there was not even a single penny in my pocket. I felt dizzy. I was at a loss, faltering before the building, roaming here and there like a haunted person….

I do not remember where I had been. Several hours later, I found myself on the roof of Mitsukoshi Department store. It was about noon.

I flopped down anywhere at random and started recollecting the twenty-six years of my life. No particular subject popped out of my lax memory.

Then I asked myself, “What desire do you have for life?” But I did not want to answer whether I had any desire at all. For me, even the significance of my own existence was difficult to decipher.

Stooping, I watched goldfish in a nearby bowl. They looked nice. The bigger ones, as well as the small ones, looked lively. In the showering May sunrays, the fish dropped their shadows at the bottom of the glass bowl. The fins waved like handkerchiefs. Trying to count the number of fins, I kept stooping down. My back was warm against the sun.

I looked down at the littered street below. Down there, the tired life swayed heavily like the fins of the gold fish. They could not free themselves from the glue—the invisible tangle of threads shackling them. I realized that I could not but mingle into that littered street, dragging my body suffering from fatigue and hunger.

Suddenly, I stopped to think. Where was I now going? Aspirins and adalines.

We misunderstood each other. How could she have given me adalines instead of aspirins? I would not believe it. She could not have done so, as I did not go around stealing or making love to women every night. It was not so, really.

We were like a lame couple, destined not to harmonize with each other's gait. I did not need to summon any logic to justify her behavior or mine. There was no need for any defense. We would stumble on and on, truth and misunderstanding on their own separate ways. Was that not the usual way?

But I was not so sure if it was right for me to trudge back to my wife. Should I? Or else, where should I go?

A siren wailed, announcing noon. It was a glorious noon, people vigorously whirling around amid the commotion of glass, steel, marble, money and ink.

My armpits suddenly itched. Ah, it was where my imitation wings had split out. The wings that I had no longer; the deleted phantasms of hope and ambition flashed in my mind like the flipping pages of a pocket dictionary.

I stopped my pace and wanted to shout.
Wings, spread out again!
Fly. Fly. Fly. Let me fly once more.
Let me fly just once more.

Encounters and Departures

I'm twenty-three, it's March, and I'm coughing up blood. One day I took a razor to the beard I had cultivated for six months, sparing only a butterfly of a moustache beneath my nose. Then, with ten packets of herbal medicine, I went to a secluded hot spring called B that had just opened. I would've been happy to die there.

But immediately my stubborn, lingering youth clung to the medicine bowl and refused to let go. There was nothing to do about it except to sulk every night beneath the lamplight of the inn and curse life's unfairness. By the third day I couldn't bear it any longer, and with the old innkeeper as my guide, I set out for the local kisaeng house, where the beating of drums could be heard every night. That's where I met Geum-hong.

"How old are you?" I asked.

Though she appeared small and naive, I could tell this one was sharp. I was thinking she was maybe sixteen, nineteen at the most, when she replied, "I'm twenty-one, sir."

"How old would you say I am?"

"Well, forty? Or thirty-nine?"

To this, I merely grunted “Hmm” and sat back, folding my arms in what I thought to be a dignified pose. We parted that day without incident.

Next day, my painter friend K came to visit me and kept poking fun at my moustache, so I shaved it off. And as soon as darkness fell, we hurried off to see Geum-hong.

“I think I’ve seen you somewhere before,” she said.

“The gentleman who was here last night—you know, the one with the moustache? I’m none other than his son. We even have the same voice, don’t you think?” I said, going along with the joke.

When the night’s entertainments were over, I stepped out into the courtyard with K. “What do you think of her?” I whispered. “She’s nice, isn’t she? Why don’t you give her a try?”

"No thanks, but you go ahead if you want."
"We could take her back to the inn and toss a coin to decide."
"Fine."
K slipped away, however, under the pretense of going to the bathroom, and I ended up with Geum-hong by default.
That night Geum-hong confessed that she had once borne a child.
"When?"

“At sixteen I put up my hair to get married, and the next year I had a baby.”

"Was it a boy?"
"A daughter."
"Where is she now?"

"She died around her hundredth day."

Tossing aside the medicine I'd brought, I spent the entire night in making love to Guem-hong. It might sound foolish, but the force of passion seemed to hold back the blood in my lungs.

I never gave Geum-hong a tip, because day or night she would stay in my room or I would go to hers. Instead of tips, I gave her an introduction to a Mr. Woo who had studied in France and was something of a libertine. Taking my suggestion, Geum-hong accompanied Mr. Woo to a "private bath." Now, this was a rather shady establishment, but it didn't bother me when I caught a glimpse of their shoes side by side on the doorstep of the place. I also recommended Geum-hong to a lawyer named C who occupied the room next to mine. Moved by the earnestness of my proposal, he eventually went to visit her as well. Even so, my beloved Geum-hong remained ever close by my side. And boasting playfully like a child, she would show me the ten-won notes that she had gotten from Mr. Woo or Lawyer C.

Then one day I had to return to Seoul for the first anniversary of my uncle's death. Before my departure Geum-hong and I spent a beautiful day together in a field where the peach trees were in blossom and a small stream flowed past a pavilion. At the train station I slipped a ten-won note in her hand. She began to cry then, saying she would use the money to reclaim her watch from the pawn shop.

By the time Geum-hong became my wife, we were deep in love. We agreed not to bring up each other's pasts. Since I had no past worth speaking of, this meant that I promised not to ask about hers.

Though she was only twenty-one and appeared to be seventeen, Geum-hong was much more mature than a woman of thirty-one. And to her, I looked forty, though I was only twenty-three and sometimes behaved no better than a boy of ten or eleven. Nonetheless, we blissfully cuddled together in marriage.

Time passed idly by. A year came and went, it was August. Sometime between late summer and early autumn, Geum-hong became nostalgic for her previous life. She must have grown bored because I lay about the house sleeping day and night. She began going out to meet interesting people and do interesting things. In other words, she was feeling cramped.

The odd thing was, this time she didn't boast of her adventures. In fact, she tried to hide them from me. This wasn't like her at all. What did she have to hide? I wouldn't have cared if she had told me. I wouldn't have cared if she had been proud of it.

But I didn't confront her with it. Instead, to make it easier for Geum-hong to enjoy herself, I sometimes left the house and stayed with P, who, when I think of him now, seemed to have put up with me out of pity.

It wasn't that I didn't believe in wifely virtue and loyalty, but I tried to look at Geum-hong's adultery as her way of rousing me out

of my stupor. So, keeping up the front of being the “virtuous wife” was her one big mistake. For my part, I went along with the charade, leaving the house more often and offering up my company for business. And thus time went by.

One day, for no apparent reason, Geum-hong gave me a severe beating. I ran out of the house crying in pain, and I was so afraid that I stayed away for three days. When I finally came back, there was no trace of her, save for a pair of her dirty socks in a corner of the room.

As stupid as it sounds, that’s how I lost my wife. Several friends of mine came by, trying to console me with what seemed like useless gossip about Geum-hong’s whereabouts, but I couldn’t understand what they were getting at anyway. They told me they had seen her with a man, boarding a bus that was headed as far as Mount Gwanak near the town of Gwacheon. Well, if that was true, the man must have been a real coward to have run so far away.

For a while I refused to live as a human being, and I allowed my memory to fade so completely that in two months’ time I had even forgotten the syllables of her name. Then one day during this period when my life stood still, Geum-hong came back to me like a returned postcard. She’d chosen this day on the advice of a fortune teller. I was quite taken aback to see her.

Her appearance was unexpectedly shabby. Deeply saddened, I put aside all hard feelings

and tried comforting her with some beer, crackers and a bowl of beef soup. But her heart still harbored anger, and, crying bitterly, she began to lay blame on me. Not knowing what else to do, I also broke out in tears.

"It's just too late. It's been two months since you went away. Why don't we just make a clean break of it," I said.

"Then what happens to me?"
"You'll find some place to go."
"Then are you going to get married, too?"

Even on the point of parting, there should be some consolation for the person you are leaving. Before she left, Geum-hong gave me a pillow as a gift.

About this pillow: it was big enough for two people. She insisted on my taking it even though I refused. For two weeks I slept on it alone, but it was so big that it was uncomfortable. What's more, it gave off a peculiar smell, of oily, unwashed hair, which troubled my sleep.

One day I sent her a postcard. "I'm seriously ill. Come back immediately." When she returned, Geum-hong found me in a pathetic state—if I had been left alone for a few more days, I might have starved to death. She rolled up her sleeves, saying she would start working that very day to keep me alive.

"Okay," I managed to say.

A heaven on earth! Although the days were growing colder, I didn't even sneeze, I was so at peace.

t was like this for two, maybe five months, and then she abruptly disappeared again. For about a month I waited, expecting her to get homesick. Finally, I pulled myself together, sold off my belongings and moved back home after twenty-one years.

I found my parents' house in a decrepit state. For two years, I, Yi Sang, the worthless son, had been going to seed, running this already declining family into the ground. And I was already twenty-seven years old.

I've always secretly believed that in every woman there is a trace of a whore. But even as I gave silver coins to prostitutes I never thought of them as whores. I know this sounds like something that has no basis in my own experiences with Geum-hong, but that's the truth.

I wrote a few stories and some lines of poetry, putting further strain on my collapsing body. I reached a point where it seemed impossible to continue with this existence. I had to escape, or to put it a better way, go into exile.

Where would I go? I boasted to everyone I ran into that I would go to Tokyo. I told some friends that I would study electrical engineering; to my old school teacher I said that I was going to learn the technique of advanced single-unit printing; and even to my closest friends I fabricated stories, saying I would master five foreign languages and maybe even study law. Most of them fell for it, but some didn't. At any rate, these were just Yi Sang's last desperate illusions, as

empty as his penniless pockets.

One day as I was drinking with my friends and, as usual, telling them lies, someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was an acquaintance by the name of Kin Sang.

"It’s been a long time, Kin Sang," he said. (He addressed me as Kin Sang because, in truth, Yi Sang is also Kin Sang.) "I’ve got someone who really wants to see you. Do you want to meet this person?"

"I wonder who it is. A man or a woman?"

"It’s a woman, which makes it all the more interesting."

"A woman?"

"She was once your oksang."

So Geum-hong had shown up in Seoul! But what did she want from me? Kin Sang told me she was staying with her sister Ilsim. For a while I hesitated, but in the end I made up my mind and went to Ilsim’s house.

"I hear your sister has come back."

"Well—if it isn’t my dear brother-in-law! I thought you were long dead. What took you so long?"

As expected, Geum-hong looked shabby and haggard. It was clear from her worn-out expression that life’s struggles had taken their toll.

"You bastard, I missed you! And so here I am in Seoul. Why else would I come up here?"

"Well, it seems I’ve come looking for you, too."

"They tell me you got hitched."

"Stop with the stupid nonsense."

"Not married, then?"

"Of course not."

Without a warning, a wooden pillow flew at my face. I gave her the usual foolish grin.

A table was set for drink. I took a drink, then she. We took turns singing lines of Yeongbyeon songs and yukjabaegi. As the night grew deeper our talk led inexorably to the realization that this would be our last meeting. Tapping out a rhythm with silver chopsticks against the table, Geum-hong lapsed into a plaintive tune I had never heard before.

It is but a dream to deceive,
But so too is being deceived,
Twisting, turning, wandering life,

Set fire to your shadowy heart—

Deathly Child

Feelers

This is the touching scene that my feelers discern.

When I open my eyes in the midst of perpetual time, I am lying quite complacently in a tidy room on the city's outskirts. I look around the room, which falls into place like memory. The windows are dusky.

Before long I'm surprised to discover the suitcase that I am supposed to guard carefully. In addition, I discover a young woman sitting like a flower next to the suitcase.

When I look at her suspiciously for no reason, she smiles brightly. Ha, ha, this is in my recollection. I consider it intently. Who is in love with this young woman?

In the middle of my contemplation, I ask idly, "Is it dawn or is it dusk?"

The woman nods her head and smiles. The hem of her blouse makes a low swishing noise as she opens up the suitcase and takes out a gleaming knife.

If I show surprise in a situation like this, the consequences may be harder to deal with. As

if in reflex, I rub my throat, and keeping my poise, I ask, “Are you an assassin?” I feign a clumsy Hwanghae dialect.

Her expression becomes clearer, the smile narrows briefly, and from near the head of my pillow she retrieves some tangerines. I don’t know how those got there. With the knife, she nimbly peels the fruit.

Well, would you look at this! Suddenly my mouth is watering and I feel the urge to engage in some bantering. “Look here, girl, are you going to marry me or not? Do you swear?” I continue, “It kills me to know that Yoon beats you everyday. So what are you going to do about it, huh?”

We eat the fruit, savoring the flavor, and time flows toward night. I hold her hand in mine and sigh, “We can’t get married until night has arrived.” This is an unexpectedly amusing experience. I want to giggle out loud. But, ah, what good is getting married! What would I know about something like that? But the whole thing is interesting nevertheless.

“It’s now night, isn’t it?”

“No.”

“What do you mean? It is night. Stop kidding around. It’s night for sure.”

“No, no it isn’t.”

“Please, stop that. It is night.”

“Well, I guess then we’ll have to get married.”

“Yes, of course.”

I let out a giggle.

I would hate Yim if I married her. She came here after leaving Yoon. She said Yoon threw her out. Though Yoon probably didn't mean it, she arrived here in tears.

(Oh, look, it's night.)

"So, what did you do?"

"Why do you need to know that?"

"Come on, tell me."

"I left him."

"Really? For good?"

"Of course."

"Hee, hee…"

"Don't insult me."

"All right."

She rises. I have to describe the state Yim is in right now. I should at least try to remember the details of her appearance. She turns the suitcase over and I wait to see what she's doing. She's causing a commotion, rummaging through the suitcase for something, but I have no idea what that is, so I can't even help her. She seems so agitated that I leave her alone and wait.

"Just what are you looking for in there?" I finally ask.

"The ring," she answers, in between sobs.

"What in the world? What ring are you talking about?"

"The wedding ring."

“Right, the wedding ring, you say.”

“Oh, where did it go? Where did that thing run off to?”

A bride who has lost her wedding ring—imagine that. It’s ridiculous. I do know that it is the groom who’s supposed to have the ring ready. So I say to her, “The ring, in principle, should be in my suitcase.”

“Where’s the suitcase?”

“I don’t have one.”

She clucks her tongue.

I take the bride’s hand, “Come closer.”

“Ouch, don’t do that. Let go.”

I assuage her peevish resistance, and with an ink brush, I paint her a double band around her left ring finger. There’s nothing on her finger, but she says it feels a little ticklish, like a natural ring.

But I never want to get married. I have to devise some pretext.

“How many times?”

“Once.”

“Really?”

“Just once.”

This is not working. But I can’t let up, so I’ll have to come up with a different method of interrogation.

“Then no one else but Yoon?”

“One.”

“Oh, come on!”

“Really, just one.”

“Enough of that.”

“OK, two.”

“There you go.”

“Three.”

“Oh, great.”

“Four.”

“That’s just great.”

“Five.”

I was deceived. I was totally deceived. The night comes. I light a candle. But then I quickly put it out, because the ring like the one I gave her can easily be exposed as a fake. The night has taken a long time to arrive.

The Beginning of Defeat

How about a scene like this? I am sitting in a barber’s chair—

Holding a familiar-looking knife, the barber lifts my chin overgrown with a beard.

“Are you an assassin?” I want to ask, but to rashly suspect this barber doesn’t seem to be in keeping with my decision to begin accepting my wife.

The blade scrapes against the stiff bristles of my beard.

What else, besides the two tangerines, were used? I can’t for the life of me recall anything else. What could it be?

Then swept up in perpetual time, I open my eyes again to find myself, not in a barbershop, but in a room prepared for a newly married couple. I seem to have gotten married last night.

I peek out the window where a sparrow is making a sober chirping noise. My beard is still all there on my chin, though.

But something is really wrong. The bride who should be asleep next to me this morning is nowhere to be found. Ha, ha, then when I was sitting in the barber's chair —that must have been reality. But, on the other hand, I can't believe that there is a dream this vivid.

I must have been deceived. Let's say that's no big loss, but how much time has really passed me by? When I think of it this way, it seems my meeting Yoon yesterday could have happened years ago. This is something I should discuss with Yoon himself. In other words, I would ask him how long it has been since I met him, though it feels to me like only a day. I feel certain that I married Yim last night, but now even that seems questionable.

But the next minute, things become even more complicated. The bride has suddenly appeared. She's wearing a western-style suit that looks a little too warm for May. This Yim is a stranger to me.

Not only her attire, but her hair has changed as well. She's cut it short. Perhaps she is another woman altogether? I'm not familiar with anyone named Yim who has short hair and dresses in a western-style suit. Then

what baleful destiny has brought her here, to enter my room without any hesitation?

The girl claps her hands together, as if brushing off dirt. “I threw it out,” she says.

When I hear her speak, I’m sure it’s Yim and my mind is put at ease. “What did you throw out?”

“The stuff I was wearing when I came here.”

“The stuff you were wearing?”

“You know, the old-fashioned blouse and skirt. What else?”

“Then did you throw that out?”

“I did it just now.”

“Just now?”

"That’s what I said, for heaven’s sake. Just now, I threw it out."

Clothes for early fall can be quite similar to clothes worn in early spring. I decide to place some trust in Yim’s words, but if she has just once... with Yoon.

Wait a minute. I feel I should explain my circumstances here. To put it simply, I’m a pretty wretched man. My life, from beginning to end, may be filled with the burden of retribution for some sins committed in a previous life. Anyone who’s ever looked away from me can tell you that I am a shapeless **modern boy**. But would you believe it if I told you that I still weigh 116 pounds? That is, though a body as gaunt as mine is rare, I’ve swallowed quite a few bullets. The weight is all in my head. This is the secret reason you should fear me.

Since things have progressed like this, as if in accordance with fate, I should reveal honestly my own objective. That is...

Yoon, Yim, and I.

Who is the most despicable of all? In other words, whose side am I on?

What to do? I want to state clearly for once —though it may be better to just stop here— I shall at least try to establish my decorous conduct and dignified bearing.

Last fall, or on a day in late summer—Yim would know the exact date of that historic occasion—I went to Yoon's office early one morning and found Yim sitting there looking rather pitiful. I was under the mistaken impression that she had just arrived, and so early in the morning at that. But in fact, she had not yet left; she had stayed out overnight and was afraid to go home to her father's scolding. The clothes she was wearing that day—were those the ones she has just thrown out?

The same **chemise**, the same **drawers**, the same hairstyle, a man and another man.

No, I mustn't do this. Maybe she threw them out so quickly because they were so unappealing, but still that was a bit rash. Anyway, I generally can't understand an ideology so extravagant.

Not only that, there's the question of my attitude. In those days, how did I spend my time? I have no conception of time. I used to give *jeon* to the landlord's kid and have him look out the window: "Is it morning or is it evening?" I would ask.

Also, I can't recall what I survived on. Surely I didn't live on dewdrops.

It's touching to see Yim trying to keep up a good appearance for someone like me.

In those days if I told people that I lived without knowing whether I was hungry or not, they would have easily believed me. I'm an inveterate liar.

It seems my lying has become incorrigible. I've made such a habit of it that sometimes escape uncontrollably from my lips without even being aware of it. If that is the case here, then I am really in a mess.

To tell the truth, I feel hungry this morning. Judging from this, what I said before about Yim throwing away her **skirt, slip, drawers**, and so on is certainly a lie. Perhaps it was I, with my stingy affection toward Yim, who told her to throw those things out?

But Yim, perky as a word I can't even pronounce, is sitting next to me clipping my nails.

This is certainly a kind of artistic lure: "If a beast is to be domesticated, the vicious fangs must be removed."

In the middle of this I do not dare peevishly say, "I'm hungry," presenting my utterly humble face to Yim and asking whether it is day or night.

Like any new bride, Yim looks pretty. Even if you were to study this single blossom under a magnifying glass, you would never guess her age. To preempt my own disappointment, I suppose her to be about

seventeen.

But she whispers in my ear, “Don’t be ridiculous. You’re just saying that to poke fun at me. I’m twenty-two. You should know that by now.”

The pitiful bride has gone out empty-handed. I guess that she has gone out to get rice, firewood, coal, and stuff for dinner.

In the meantime, to relieve the boredom, I think about calling the landlord’s kid. He’s already at the sliding door, sticking his head in to tell me, “It’s morning.”

But from now on, he won’t get another *jeon* from me. I won’t be able to play around with this kid anymore; so without giving him any reason, I put on an angry face and slam the door shut. I close my eyes and my heart begins to pound, when I hear the boy wailing as he walks away. For a long while, I sit alone shivering. When Yim comes back, she smells of milk. I slowly gather my energy and devote my attention to Yim. I like that she seems almost like a newborn baby.

“I went all the way over to the dairy farm.”

“So?”

She has brought custard and a bottle of goat milk wrapped in a cloth bundle.

Even then I jabber about only my instinctive needs. “I’m so thirsty I could die.” It’s like that for the most part.

Here in the outskirts near the dairy farm, there are no electric lights and no running water. Instead, there is the outdoor pump.

One day she comes in crying after fetching water. I think she's crying but then she also seems to be laughing. She laughs, though her eyes are filled with tears.

"I don't know whose child that was. But the little thing says to me, You've cut your hair, are you going to school? I must've looked to him like I was his age. I was so dumbfounded. So I tell him, No, I'm not going to school. And he says to me, Pour me some water, I want to wash my feet. So I took a pail of water and practically threw it on him. Then he asks me if I didn't want to wash my feet, too. I said I was going to do it later and came right home. I mean, how ridiculous."

No one should ever be deceived. Six years ago, this woman found her virginity too bothersome and gave it up for a cheap price, so to speak. Since then she has never known respite. I know this, as well I should, yet suddenly feeling capricious, I say, "Wait a minute, how much was all that?" Two tangerines, twenty *jeon* at the most. And the candle, I almost forgot, is three *jeon*. Twenty *jeon* for the custard. Then the goat milk was gotten for nothing?

"It was forty-three *jeon* altogether."
"That's unbelievable!"
"What do you mean?"
"That's an indivisible number."
"A prime number?"
Right. Remarkable.
"It's remarkable!"

If I bluntly present even this pitiful sight, then this act of revenge will end up squandered in perfection, or at least close to perfection.

To have a woman reveal her fate to me and to receive that revelation so easily, I could say that I'm in a relatively happy state—enough to liken myself to the status of a priest in a confession booth.

But I'm shrewd, nevertheless. And because I'm shrewd, I never readily divulge the evidence of happiness on my face.

My refusal to shave my beard, then, must be considered the most natural and skillful gesture in my silent practice of this logic.

However, this thick-headed woman never points out the shabby patch of ugliness on my chin. Needless to say, this is because the revelation of her fate was but a contrivance and her affection for me is lacking, or entirely absent.

To tell the truth, I have no hope for anything like affection. So let us suppose that the day after my marriage I took my bride on an outing and fortunately lost her somewhere in the streets. I wouldn't lose sleep looking for her.

Let us then suppose that one day a rather remarkable notice is delivered to me. "I have found this girl on so and so street on so and so date, and having ascertained that she is your bride, I request that you come and claim her promptly."

I would stubbornly refuse to go even then. Let her come of her own two feet, I would

think. My mind would be filled only with thoughts of freedom as vast the ocean.

Since people most likely to lose their wallets are those who don't care which pocket they put them in, I decide that, likewise, when I'm walking out in the street with my bride Yim, I will pay her no attention. And not only that, I have a migraine.

It feels dizzy to be walking on the outskirts of the city in May. The streets are blindingly bright.

Whip a Running Horse

This is the feeling I have.

The day after our marriage, we are on an outing, but for some reason, Yim doesn't walk out in front of me. Does this mean that she has no particular place she wants to go? Then is she, unexpectedly, lonely?

Like applying another lash of the whip to a running horse, I walk at a leisurely pace just to see where Yim's short strides would finally collapse. But it's no use.

From what I've heard, when the shepherd steers the livestock, it is usually the livestock that takes the lead.

Should I be surprised that I am taking the lead? In a situation like this, is it more dignified to simply accept without questioning why?

Before I am aware of it, however, she has suddenly disappeared.

Thinking of solitude and my old age, and

without being aware that I am at the corner of a bank, I look around several times, behind and to the sides.

There are few girls with short hair and in western-style suits.

"I suppose she's lost for good."

When an expected event draws near, I must manage to get my wavering body under control. But Yim appears like magic through the front entrance of the bank. Her high heels look a little heavier than before, but this doesn't strike me as strange.

"I changed the ten-*won* pieces all into ten-*jeon*. Look at this huge pile. Put it all in your pocket."

That breezy phrase of mine, whip a running horse, has gone into a slump.

I am not happy. Nor am I brazen enough to put on a cheerful face in front of this girl. So, quickly I mutter, "A **seuvenir**!"

If two people are walking in balanced step with each other toward a common destination, they may appear, on the surface, to be intimate. I order my mind to be patient and begin a revenge based on **paradox**. How long do I repress this disdain?

She says let's not count the money.
This is evidence that she's never had any affection in the first place!
But as long as the word "revenge" has left my lips, I can go on insisting that I have affection for Yim.

After a while, my tired feet and Yim's pair of high heels arrive before the gates of Yoon's

house. Shrewdly, even at this point, Yim doesn't even flinch. She's both brazen and plucky. Yoon is out, and this provides me with an unexpected opportunity to test Yim. I address a note to Yoon and hand it to the maid: "Will expect you at Thaimond at 5 P.M." I steal a glance at Yim's expression, and to pretend I'm on her side, I even have a ready explanation for certain blood types that lack coloring.

Faces that never change color even when confronted with a storm—that is the source of man's hardship. Truly I am a man under hallucination, unable to retrieve an impression of one single face after wandering all day through a dense forest. To me, countless expressions look all the same like graves at a public cemetery, so how am I going to put on a dignified air to cover up this restless anxiety?

This is the first time that I've hesitated at the entrance to the Thaimond coffee shop. The waiter boy here knows that Yoon and Yim are a couple that loves the shaded corner, so if Yoon should arrive here now—

I write another note. "Will be at your home by six for dinner, signed an unexpected Man and Wife." I leave the note at the counter and leave.

I had no intention of buying this detestable toy, DOUGHTY DOG. It was merely the result of a gamble taken with ten-won's worth of change and a sudden brief attack caused by Yim's unreadable mood.

The events at six o'clock result in my complete downfall.

Suppose… (I say to Yoon)
“Ah, you’re home. Were you at Thaïmond? I left a note there saying you should expect me for dinner at six. Surely there will be drinks with the dinner?”

“Sure, I was there. The dinner isn’t ready, because my wife is out somewhere, but I already had my drink.”

First of all, Yoon did not go to Thaïmond. According to the maid, he came home not five minutes after we left the note and has waited since then. In other words, he had no intention of putting himself out to see me at five.

I want to blurt out, “You’re really quite arrogant,” but I stop myself. Instead, pushing out my stomach a little, I say, "Let me introduce my wife. Her name is Yim."

"Your wife? I almost mistook her for my wife, she looks so alike."

"I’m sorry to tell you this, but I’ve also decided to pick up the old fountain pen to scribble out some threepenny novel. My theory is that memory is, to put it simply, something which refuses to be held, even more than this fountain pen. What do you think of that?"

"You’re biting off more than you can chew. Your aristocratic tastes aren’t inherited. Look at yourself, with your weak, unhealthy body. Just try to manage what you have, and leave it at that. All your blunt talk isn’t going to help you with the fountain pen you once put aside."

My face is completely subdued. I have

nothing to say. Just as an excuse for something to do, I take out the DOUGHTY DOG and wind up the spring. A little greyhound is pulling at a shoe as big himself. Pull and jerk as he might, the steel-hard positions of the shoe and of the dog are never going to change. It's a pathetic sight, and I somehow feel dirty.

DOUGHTY
Does it mean filthy? Anxious? I can hardly bear the weight of these letters.

"I must say I was pretty surprised when I came home and my maid told me that a man of about forty or so with a girl of about seventeen or eighteen had come looking for me. She said the girl looked to be his daughter or maybe his mistress. Anyway, the note you left didn't have a name, so there was no way for me to know that it was you. I figured that going to Thaïmond without any idea who I was looking for wouldn't prove useful, so I decided to sit tight and wait here for whoever it was that wanted to see me. Anyway, it seems things have been at cross-purposes all day today."

Seizing an opportune moment, I turn and take a look at Yim.
With the hands that have toyed with two men, and her stubby fingers that call to mind some species of fish, she skillfully winds the spring on DOUGHTY DOG.
This, to me, seems a cause for vexation, or the seed of my guilt. Ah, ah…

There is no way for me to avoid this damp, weary phrase, until I have studied enough to come up with words that can support my

collapsing body.

Elucidation

A woman is indeed a flexible existence, whose prerequisite for thought is the duty, the divine privilege, of examining a man thoroughly.

The next moment, my final, refined tastes cry out, "A domesticated animal no more!"

Now I want to abandon everything in the field of forgetfulness except a thin layer of taste and cross the threshold of myself.

Agony!
I no longer want the foreboding smile of the specter in the glass. I want to laugh a hearty laugh, the kind of laugh you could feel with your hands. It is neither filled with nor lacking agony. I want to look upon this vulgar disarray with the aloof attitude of someone who has been left on a highway at night...

This will require a considerable degree of technique, like a knife cutting through water. "Oh, I almost forgot that it's the day to collect my pay from T! (Still, the things I haven't spat out linger on my tongue, squirming like a school of minnows. Yoon is unresponsive as a plant, shielded from human civilization.) But listen, Yoon. Yim's naked body that you say you've tasted all over was nothing more than the outer layer, a film of soap. Now I have monopolized Yim's body as no one has before. So, why don't you concede you've lost the upper hand and throw away that arrogance of yours?"

Yoon’s face becomes flushed as if exposed to the setting sun. The sardonic sneer, glistening like oil and spreading thickly across his face, provokes my aggression.

As though he pities me, Yoon says, "I have been quite patient with you. But if you persist with this annoying tirade of yours, I may be tempted to give you a slap across the face."

Yim turns away from the toy dog jerking at the shoe and, as if telling us to submit this foolish quarrel to her judgment, makes a hand gesture reminiscent of a dancer’s.

"I am the goddess of justice. Why don’t the two of you try exchanging heads? You can’t, can you? So I’m telling you to stop this. The body I gave to Yoon came with its own code of virtue, just as my marriage yesterday is governed by another. So there’s nothing to boast of, or to be jealous about. Now, why don’t you put an end to this and shake hands like good sports?"

We do not shake hands. I don’t know about Yoon, but I feel that the rod of discipline, more unbearable than a handshake, has come down on my head. I have the troubling feeling that I’m liable to end up as flat as a herring if I continue to sit here like this. So I abruptly stand up and think of spitting out the window, but instead, collecting myself, I say to Yoon, "Anyway, from now on, all the money in the world won’t get you even a glimpse of Yim’s naked body. This is no longer a matter calling for your lofty patience. What do you say to keeping a fair but separate peace between us from now

on?"

"You know, they say that a man who comes in second place ten times must still bow his head before the man who comes in first just once. You should have enough sense to observe such proprieties, so why are you getting so worked up? And what's this about 'all the money in the world'? Listen closely. I'm the kind of man who chases after a woman all the more if she resists me. But if one day she should suddenly show fondness toward me—that is, she allows me to lay my hand on that final thing of hers—she suddenly appears despicable to me. You speak of fairness and whatnot, but I tell you this plain and honest. I simply hate people who are below me. After a woman reveals that final thing to a man, she invariably sits at his feet and looks up at him. This is what I can't stand."

At last, I turn around completely. I truly can't face such a thorough affront.

Yoon lights his cigarette again and fishes around in his pocket for something. The cigarette is already lit, so he is looking for a weapon to murder me with...

"Here's ten won. Don't pester poor T for money. Why don't you buy him a drink for a change? Your threepenny pride seems to have put you in low spirits today, so it might do you good to have some wine from your so-called bride. So why don't I take her off your hands for a while and take her to the cinema? Why, does that bother you?"

"You don't have to tell me what to do. Anyway, I need to go out by myself for a

while, so Yim, why don’t you go to the cinema with Yoon? You like the cinema, don’t you?"

But even before I can finish, Yim says in a sullen voice, "No one has the right to pity or give charity to my husband, not even I. You mustn’t take that money. Here—" And she brings out a pile of ten-*jeon* coins.

"Ha! Would you look at that!" With a smile that doesn’t easily leave his face, Yoon smothers his cigarette in the ashtray as though killing a bug.

In truth, I said the same thing to myself, though not aloud. But I put on a smile, rub Yim’s back, place a handful of those coins in my pocket and finally get up to leave.

"I’ll meet you later outside the cinema entrance. Where is it?"

"Near Dansung Temple. I must say I feel a little sorry that today I was deprived of the privilege of lending my friend some drinking money."

For about a hundred paces ahead of me, the street seems to be spinning in place. It’s nothing to boast about—that my steps are faltering because I’m so dizzy.

TEXT

"A love affair? When there is no duty to fidelity, then I enjoy having love affairs. Do you believe me? The day that I assume the promise of fidelity, however, the force of my conscience erases all memories of such past affairs. Believe me."

Critique—the above becomes Yim's clever lies when considered in light of the following account also given by Yim.

"Even when there is a vow of fidelity, an affair conducted in the following manner—in my subjective opinion—is forgivable. That is, if a wife or a husband, by means of a special strategy, carries out an affair smoothly, with complete discretion, and leaves no trace of it whatsoever. However, in cases where such deeds are deemed unacceptable, it would result in guilt and torment. Because I am familiar with both guilt and torment, I would personally find it difficult. Do you believe me? Please, believe me."

Critique—here again the passage towards the end, where she suggests it would be "difficult" for her, is clearly a lie. This is certain, based on the following, also in her handwriting, which unwittingly reveals her subconscious thoughts.

"There is a clear difference between being incapable of an affair and not having an affair. This difference holds true, no matter what the conditions. What do I mean, you ask? Well, let me explain. Be happy for me: I am not incapable of an affair but I simply don't engage in it. Affairs are a self-conscious romance. There is a good word for the feeling I get when I think about how I'm not having an affair, though I am certainly capable of it. Nausea. This to me is the intolerable punishment that the body deals out. All the spontaneous poses of the body to me are like filthy rag scraps. Be happy for me. I hope you will love me in accordance with this perspective."

Even when measured by the criteria of refinement and learning, it is certainly more admirable not to have an affair than to be incapable of it. But her saying that she chooses not to have an affair though capable of it sounds a bit like a conditional contract that leaves open the possibility that she could, in fact, have one at any time, depending on my level of tolerance. It is as though she's forcing me to set up a safety zone in the middle of a busy road.

In order to lead you to an epilogue that I myself find disagreeable, I shall step on thin ice and devise the following dialogue.

"By your account you've given your body to two men, and it really perhaps far more than you intended. Yet you enter my castle gates with such boldness and righteousness. Have you no shame?"

"You, on the other hand, have carelessly exposed that noble body of yours to countless whores. It's the same."

"Ha, ha! You must have forgotten that there is a certain structure in our society. Where do you think you are, in Tibet? Or perhaps you think we're still in the age of the pithecanthropus when men suckled their offsprings. How pitiful you are. I'm sorry to tell you that for a man there is no conception of the flesh. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"I am sorry, but it is you who seem to be swiftly turning back the clock on our society. Promise of fidelity must be established on a one-to-one basis. Do you think that we're still in the primitive age of marriage by

plunder and rape?"

"In regards to the man's authority in matters of the flesh, jealousy is an instinct, not some scrap of learned culture. You ignore this instinct, throwing down your childish gauntlet of culture and refinement, but it's useless."

"Then in the interest of fairness, and based on instinct as you've defined it, I shall delve jealously into your past as well. Shall we begin the count?"

Critique—there is nothing further in my textbook about this.

Hoping for a new morality, I shall discard my obsolete air of dignity.

From now on I shall only try, though my efforts may be inadequate, to attain knowledge that I can clearly expound.

When I am well past sixty and if my knees still hold up, I wish to visit the teashop with a cluster of grandchildren. This is my sorrowful wish today, to some day face my grandchildren with a peaceful mind.

The Fall

If things continue like this, I fear that my health regimen, my last neutral territory, may easily fall apart. I must carefully inspect where I'm sitting to make sure that it harbors no harmful vermins.

As I sit facing T over glasses of insipid drinks, my eyes are damp with tears. That's only natural since I've been thinking of only how to kill myself in a way that fits my

circumstances. The suicide verdict that has been down to me reads:

"It has been shown that the defendant has hastily squandered his life. To extend the defendant's life by a day would result in an unnecessary burden to the operational costs of the universe. Therefore, it is decreed hat the defendant shall enter the rat hole without turning back even to look at his own tail."

My language has already dissipated over the vast wilderness of this world, so much so that my head is but an empty cave and my thoughts destitute. But I cannot simply go to sleep in silence for all eternity before I've found a way to rationalize these pathetic scenes I've conjured as in a dream.

"Ultimately, the hot-air balloon invented by the Montgolfier brothers will impede the development of an airplane that is heavier than air. Likewise, the bird's wing, which provided the impetus for the development of an airplane heavier than air, can be said to have impeded the progress of our present airplanes. That is, the effort to build an airplane with wings that flutter like the bird's can be likened to making an automobile by copying the gallop of the horse."

A dead language without intonation. That is as it should be. It's also borrowed from Jean Cocteau.

Nevertheless, in my own words, I will shout a phrase of despair or hope until I die. "I am secretly in love with a certain lady author!"

This lady author is cheerfully careless. In every line of her manuscript there is always one typographical error. In front of this woman, I only have the psychological latitude to show her my ugliest behavior. Fortunately, she is a woman of experience, who has already borne children.

But don't take everything I say seriously. It is merely the instrument by which I keep up a proper appearance.

"There came a split between me and the woman I wished to marry, which led to my marriage to another woman. But this marriage, which was desired by neither of us, led to the split between me and yet another woman who, unexpectedly, had wished to marry me. So, in turn, that woman married another man. And now I'm standing vacantly on top of a marriage that is fast going to ruin. One spear with three spikes, you might say."

T gazes steadily at me as if to pity me and says, "If things are so hard, why don't you go abroad. Go and learn a new language, meet new people, and start over little by little. That seems like the only way that you'll save yourself from suicide. I hope I don't sound too heartless."

Suicide? Then, has T sensed my intentions?

"Don't be so surprised. The fact that you never carry around a knife in your pocket is a sure sign that you have suicidal intentions. Of course, this little epigram I've borrowed from someone else."

If I continue sitting here, I feel I will explode

like a blowfish. Leave the bar just in time and go to a suitable spot near Dansung Temple and wait for about three minutes. Yoon and Yim walk out side by side, like two columns of text on a page. I decide to see “The Late Spring Prologue” with T.
After hesitating a bit, Yoon says to me, “Here, take the baton.”
But bowing, I reply, “Dear first-place finisher, please pass by me like the express train speeds by the small local stations along its route.”
At that moment, Yim’s face is full of venom. As it should be.
I feel that it is about time to throw away the honor of the second-place finisher. So, I declined the relay race. As a tramp who has squandered all his language, I was temporarily borrowing the success of Yokomitsu Riichi.
Yim and Yoon have disappeared into the crowd. In the darkness of the theater **gallery**, I sit shoulder to shoulder with T, watching a comedy involving people who have switched shoes. My lower stomach aches. When I press on it with my hand, the gas seems to come up my throat, ready to explode as laughter. I think of opium. I’m a wild man without caution. I would have to be half dead to stop acting foolishly.

On the screen, those who deserve to die struggle to stay alive, while the good characters who should live are clamoring to die. A fellow licking his mustache with his tongue turns toward the audience and says, "Our doctor stubbornly insists on saving the lives of those who want to die. And he himself continues to trudge on in a world

that is hard to live in. Isn’t it absurd?"

In other words, the people on the screen hopping this way and that were like those who were trying to invent cars with hoofs.

In the air of theater that gradually empties out, I feel weighed down by a terror, the feeling of sinking as if stones are tied to my waist. Just as my mind is becoming hazy, T slips a flashing knife in my hand.

(He means I should take revenge.)

(Should I stab Yoon? That would mean my decisive defeat, because I don’t want to stab Yoon.)

(I should stab Yim, then? I can’t believe I’m still alive after seeing the venom in her eyes.)

My heart is becoming frozen. I grind my teeth.

(Ah-ha. He’s suggesting I kill myself. But that’s difficult, too difficult.)

As if mocking my cowardice, T puts something round and lukewarm in my hand. It turns out to be a tangerine. Apparently, he had it in his coat pocket.

Before my mouth begins to water, tears like the vaporous steam forming on a cooling glass well up in my eyes.

About the Author

During his brief 27 years, **Yi Sang** (born Kim Hae-Gyeong in Seoul, 1910) produced poetry, fiction, and essays that introduced innovations in form and language and delved into the complexities of passion and the indeterminate nature of self. Educated in schools run by the Japanese colonial authorities, he encountered the works of the European avant-garde that served as the basis for his own experimentations.
Yi, who suffered from tuberculosis, died in Tokyo, where his illness was worsened by a period of imprisonment on charges of "thought offense." In 1977, the Yi Sang Literature Prize, recognizing high achievement in Korean fiction, was established in his honor.

About the translators

Ahn Jung-hyo is a bilingual novelist whose books, *White Badge* and *Silver Stallion* among others, have been published in Korea, the United States, Denmark and Japan. He has translated into Korean and English almost 150 books, including *The World According to Garp*.

Born in Seoul, **James B. Lee** completed

graduate studies in writing and literature at Columbia University. His fiction, essays, and art criticism have appeared in various American literary journals and art magazines. He has recently completed a book-length translation of Yi Sang's prose writings.